

# *Cranberries*

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## **Cranberry Bloom Bee-gins Early**

Cranberry bloom is in full swing, and that means busy honey bees are out on the bogs all over town.

The bees were put to work a few weeks early this season. According to Tom Bewick, Director of the University of Massachusetts Cranberry Experiment Station in Wareham, bloom occurred about 2 weeks ahead of normal this year. "The early bloom is a direct result of El Nino. The mild winter and spring temperatures brought the vines out of dormancy earlier than usual," he said.

Pollination of the cranberry crop, usually taking place from June to July, is necessary for a successful crop. Bees are usually introduced to the crop at about 50% bloom and remain on the bog until fruit set. Although this usually takes 3 to 4 weeks, most pollination is completed within a few days. However, bees become most active during sunny, warm days with temperatures between 50 and 85 degrees Fahrenheit. With the heavy rainfall last week, it may take the bees longer to get the job done.

Some cranberry growers own their own hives; those who don't, rely on commercial beekeepers to supply them with these "migrant workers." By the time some commercial bees arrive in southeastern Massachusetts, they've traveled by truck up the East coast, pollinating other crops including blueberries and citrus.

Local bee keeper, Peter Wilson, uses bees to pollinate cranberries, apples, blueberries, squash, cucumbers and pumpkins. Wilson says that without bees, there wouldn't be a cranberry crop. "Versus any other insect that is pollinating, they (bees) are not the most efficient, but they have the numbers which are necessary for a cranberry crop," he said. There is an advantage to using a greater number of bees. "The more pollen visits the bees make to a cranberry flower, the greater the size of the berry and keeping quality," Wilson said.

Surprisingly, honey production isn't much benefit to those using bees for cranberry pollination. Wilson points out that honey bees don't produce much cranberry honey because of the short bloom period and difficulty retrieving the small amounts of nectar found in cranberries. According to Wilson, honey is just the "frosting on the cake."